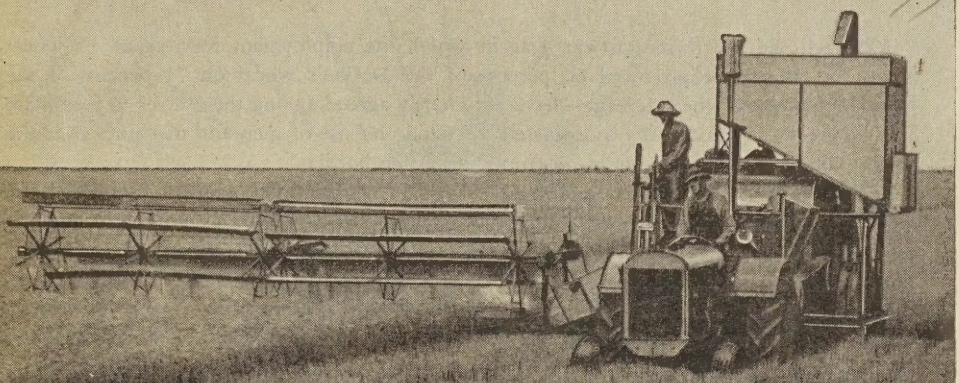
THE MIDWEST WHEAT HARVEST



TEN WHEAT STATES FIND AN ANSWER TO THEIR HARVEST LABOR PROBLEMS

FARM PLACEMENT SERVICE
United States Employment Service
and Affiliated State Agencies
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

FOREWORD

1950 will be the third postwar year in which the employment services of 10 wheat States—in which are produced 60 percent of the Nation's wheat on 72 percent of the Nation's harvested wheat acreage—have voluntarily agreed among themselves to formulate and adhere to a plan for the coordinated direction and use of men and machines over the 55,000,000 acres of wheat-producing land within their borders.

Over the years, the wheat harvest has acquired a luster that gives it high dramatic qualities. Perhaps in no other place in the world do men and machines unite in so gigantic an effort to reap a product of the soil. At least a million persons work in the harvest at some time during the 20 or more weeks of the season. A quarter of a million grain combines and two or three times that number of other vehicles move through the fields. There is the drama of a race against time and against the elements. There is toil, and sweat, disappointments, and high rewards. There is transition, too, for machines are doing much of the work that was formerly done by men and farm animals. And there is sweeping movement, for the hundreds of thousands of machines owned by individual farmers in the 10 States are supplemented by other thousands that move through them in the Nation's oldest migration of agricultural workers.

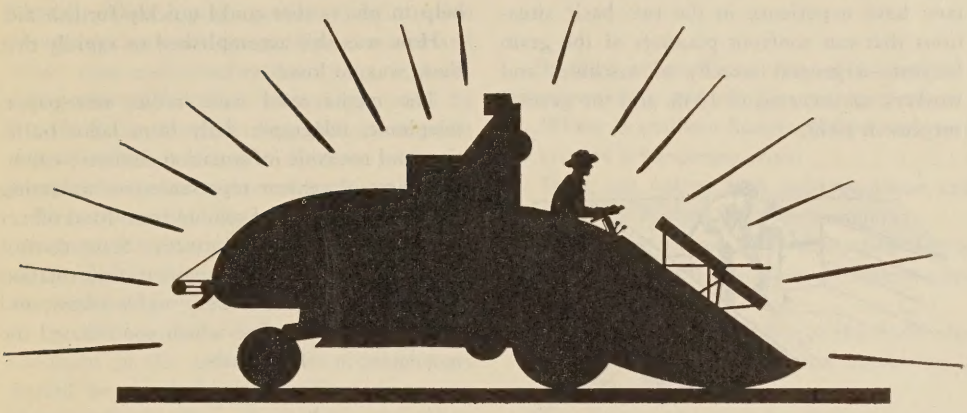
The drama in the wheat harvest is no longer in the great number of men working long hours at top speed under a hot sun to reach their goal. Now the drama is in the intelligent, planned direction of the thousands of pieces of harvesting machinery and transportation equipment that are required to bring immense crops of expanded acreages from field to storage.

It is in this phase of the grain harvest that the 10 State employment services, through their farm placement activities, are so rapidly increasing their value to midwest grain farmers.

The Wheat Harvest Plan is formulated each year by the State employment services in Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming. In each of these States there is a normal demand at harvest time for men and machines from outside their borders. Operations of these State employment services are coordinated by the United States Employment Service, through its Farm Placement Service. The contribution of each of these agencies to the 1949 grain harvest is told briefly in the following pages.

The midwest wheat harvest is an annual phenomenon. It has become so mechanized and so rapid that the movement of men and machines in 10 of the principal wheat-growing States requires a high degree of coordination. This booklet describes the efforts of the United States Employment Service and affiliated agencies of those 10 States to help bring that coordination to the wheat harvest.

THE WHEAT HARVEST



The 1949 wheat harvest in the 10 States had its beginnings in Oklahoma City and Omaha.

In January, representatives of the headquarters and regional offices of the United States Employment Service met with farm placement representatives of the 10 States in Oklahoma City for a preliminary appraisal of the season's harvest. They met again in Omaha during the last week of April to ratify the arrangements made during and after the previous meeting and to make more complete plans for the harvest, which would start in Texas about a month later.

Behind the conferences were two consecutive great wheat harvests within the 10 States —the 945,000,000 bushels of 1947 and the 831,000,000 bushels in 1948.

The 1948 harvest also was the first postwar period in which the United States Employment Service was called upon to coordinate the efforts of the employment services in the 10 States into an organized movement for the more efficient guidance and direction of combines and workers through their grain-growing areas.

The group that planned the 1949 harvest took a long look at the previous year's record. State employment services had found it necessary during 1948 to emphasize the recruitment of workers and combines and other vehicles, for it was apparent that there would be a general scarcity during the harvest. They also gauged the number of combines that would be available in local areas, as a basis for estimating the number of custom combines that would be needed from out-of-State sources, to be moved from county to county, area to area, and State to State, in the traditional grain harvest pattern.

The group planning the 1949 harvest found the picture had changed. It was apparent from the information brought along by State representatives that there would be a general surplus of men and machines in the coming season.

Consequently, the principal problem was not in finding sufficient workers to complete the harvest, but to direct the movements of custom combines and crews in such a manner that they would go to places where they were needed with the least loss of time and effort, and *not* go to places where they were unneeded.

A month later the first grain fields were entered by wheat combines. The initial cutting was in Oklahoma on May 25, and the next day the Texas harvest began.

Immediately there occurred a series of situations that upset the normal schedule for the harvest. The resolving of these situations

illustrates the strength and value of the system of communications and direction afforded by the cooperative agreement among the 10 States, for the 1949 season was in complete contrast to the year before.

The employment services of the 10 States now have experience in the two basic situations that can confront planners of the grain harvest—a general scarcity of machines and workers, as occurred in 1948, and the general surplus in 1949.

The difficulties in the 1949 harvest began in Texas around the end of May. Normally, some wheat comes to maturity in Texas about 2 weeks earlier, but excessive rains caused a 2-week delay.

When the skies finally cleared over Texas' South Plains, wheat was ready for harvest farther north in the Panhandle. The Texas harvest extended through all of June and well into July. At the same time large areas of wheat in Oklahoma and Kansas were maturing.

There was a hectic scramble for combines in the three-State area. The normal pattern for Oklahoma and Kansas custom combine operators—southward into Texas for the beginning of the harvest and then northward as crops mature—was disrupted. Many combine operators were routed back to their home areas, and were replaced in the Texas harvest by State-wide movements of local combines that had seldom before gone out of their immediate territory.

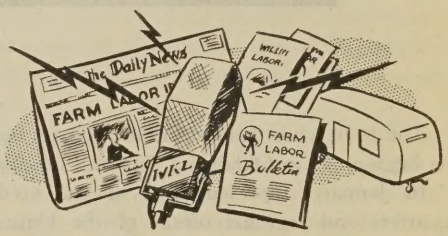
At the end of the first week in June there was a shortage of 700 machines in Oklahoma. Through the facilities of the State employment services, appeals were sent to Kansas, to South Dakota, and to Minnesota, and were answered rapidly.

Two weeks later, farmers in southern Kansas found their wheat maturing. The Kansas agency too sent requests for help to Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, the Dakotas, Nebraska, Montana, and Missouri. Machines came into the territory as needed and the crisis was short-lived.

Thus, the needs of each State or area were satisfied before conditions got out of hand, either by local measures, or by sending for help to places that could quickly furnish aid.

How was this accomplished so rapidly that there was no loss?

The media used were radio, newspaper, telephone, telegraph, daily farm labor bulletins, and roadside information stations; volunteer farm placement representatives operating in crop areas of need remote from local offices of State employment services; State control offices to collect and disseminate information to farmers, combine owners, and workers; and a central control office which coordinated the movement in all 10 States.



Perhaps the methods used in Kansas—the Nation's largest producer of wheat—will illustrate how complex the grain harvest can become even in a single State, and will reveal the way that such situations are solved by cooperation between the community, the grower, and the employment service.

Kansas farmers own some 60,000 grain combines. To harvest its 14,000,000 acres of wheat in 1949, Kansas required a supplement of four to five thousand combines and 12,000 to 14,000 workers from outside the State.

The Kansas harvest started about June 10. Ten days before, a State control office had been established at Great Bend. Fifty-two tem-

porary farm placement representatives were hired, trained, and assigned to appropriate local offices of the Kansas State Employment Service.

As each of these representatives went to work, he sent a night telegram to the State control office giving pertinent information about requirements for combines, trucks and labor, crop and weather conditions, and any other relevant facts that became apparent. By 8 o'clock the next morning this information was tabulated on a map of the State to show a completely current picture of harvest activities.

The report could have shown on some one day that a certain county would have a surplus of 10 combines and that on the following day another county would need 20. Word would go to the county having a surplus to route machines to the area of need. Other areas would be similarly informed. Information about such situations also would go to State Highway Ports of Entry, established at some 70 points where roads enter the State.

The State control office was probably the most direct and effective method of moving surpluses quickly to areas of need, at the same time reducing aimless movements by combines and workers.

Other methods were used, too. By 9:30 every morning a news release covering the current situation was prepared and given to a correspondent of two large news services which served some 50 newspapers and a dozen radio stations. In the early afternoon a Kansas Farm Labor Bulletin was placed in the mails giving a complete summary of the harvest to local offices and to employment services of surrounding States, to temporary farm placement representatives, to Ports of Entry, to highway patrolmen, and to other places and individuals where such information would aid in keeping harvesters moving to the proper places.

By these means Kansas was able to solve a situation made exceedingly complex because:

1. Wheat in southern Kansas ripened early and created a temporary crisis;
2. Yield was not as high as anticipated and combines finished their work rapidly;
3. Farmers in Kansas and surrounding States became free and anxious to do custom combine work; and
4. Decreased yields in States to the north also decreased demand for custom combining in those States.

The Kansas situation in 1949 was typical of one that comes often, not only in the grain States, but over the Nation, though many persons outside agricultural activities are not well aware of it.

In June, Kansas was a source of supply, sending men and machines southward into Texas and Oklahoma. Later it became a "demand" State for 2 weeks, and called on other States for help. Then, as the harvest tide passed through its fields, Kansas once more became a "supply" State, and even developed a considerable surplus. Its employment service then had the task of encouraging Kansas custom combine operators to remain at home, by publicizing the similar surpluses in States to the north.

Other wheat States had like problems, some small and some serious. Weather was the principal upsetting factor in 1949 over most of the wheat-growing area; for the 1949 crop in the 10 States was 20 percent less than their

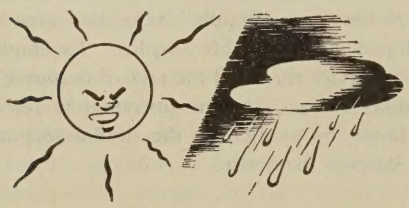
1948 total, thus destroying anticipations of combine owners and other workers for another season of full work comparable to those of 1947 and 1948.

In 1949 only 3 of the 10 States—New Mexico, Texas, and Wyoming—surpassed their 1948 production. Most of the other States were far under their 1948 totals. Kansas, though still retaining its top-ranking title, produced only 72 percent as much wheat as in 1948. On the other hand, New Mexico's 1949 crop was 60 percent greater, and Wyoming's production was an all-time record, both States enjoying good weather and few harvesting difficulties. Texas, despite its early troubles, had a fine large crop.

Oklahoma ended a successful season with a considerable surplus of combines and workers.

Nebraska's yield was disappointing because of excessive rain, and a considerable measure of its employment service activity was in reducing migration to the State, through publicizing its surplus of machines and workers.

Colorado also suffered from extremes in weather. Lack of moisture ruined a great deal of winter wheat, and hail cut down much of the later crop so that there was a general surplus of harvesters.



South Dakota had a similar situation, and North Dakota a less grim result. Both States used all available publicity media to discourage combine operators from coming inside their borders.

Montana suffered severely from weather hazards. Drought in the spring months and hail in August cut down the crop, with a grasshopper infestation taking a heavier toll. About 10,000 State combines and 700 out-of-State machines were in the Montana harvest, and the State employment service was active in bringing order to a developing condition of aimless wandering.

A number of facts stand out when we look at the 1949 harvest in the 10 States in the light of past experience.

The effects of mechanization emphasize the proved necessity for increased organization of harvest equipment and manpower. There is evidence that grain growers, custom operators, and other harvest workers are placing an increased amount of reliance in the ability of State employment services to keep pace with the transition from men to machines, and to keep the harvest moving.

There are about 600,000 combines in the United States. Perhaps 40 percent of them are in the above wheat States. The national total of combines is now about 15 times the number we had in 1939. The machines themselves have been greatly improved, so much that 2 or 3 men using an appropriate kind and amount of machinery can harvest a 500-acre field as rapidly as 10 or 15 men and teams could do the job at the turn of the century.

Such facts are well known among grain farmers. Even so, with farmers able to plant and harvest much greater acreages today than even 10 years ago, because of wide use of cultivating and harvest machinery, the grain farmer may not be aware of the increase in efficiency of the harvesting operation in the past decade.

In a study of the national grain harvest made by the U. S. Department of Agriculture

covering the period from 1939 through 1944, it was found that increased efficiency in the grain harvest in the 10 wheat States resulted in a saving of seven-tenths of a man-hour for each harvested acre within their borders. On the 1944 harvested acreage this resulted in a saving of 29.5 million man-hours, equivalent to 49,000 men working 10 hours a day for 60 days.

If we assume that the same rate of efficiency lasted through 1949, then the saving applied to that year's acreage would show 38.5 million man-hours saved, equivalent to 64,000 men working 10 hours a day for 60 days.

Again, it can be shown that for every acre harvested in these 10 States in 1939, there were expended 5.7 man-hours of labor, which is 3.3 man-hours less than the national average for the harvest of wheat acreage. By 1944, the 10 States' labor requirements were lowered to 5 man-hours per acre, compared to 7 for the Nation. A projection of these figures for 1949 would show an estimate of only 4.5 man-hours for the 10 States, compared to 6 for the Nation.

At the same time the harvested wheat acreage in the United States has risen from 52.5 million in 1939 to 76.7 million last year, and the 10-State acreage from 34.2 million to 55 million.

These are the things with which the United States Employment Service and its affiliated agencies in the 10 States are concerned. For upon these organizations falls the major responsibility for planning and coordinating the voluntary movements of thousands of workers to whom millions of persons look for their daily bread.

This emblem is displayed by custom combine operators taking part in the 10-State wheat harvest.

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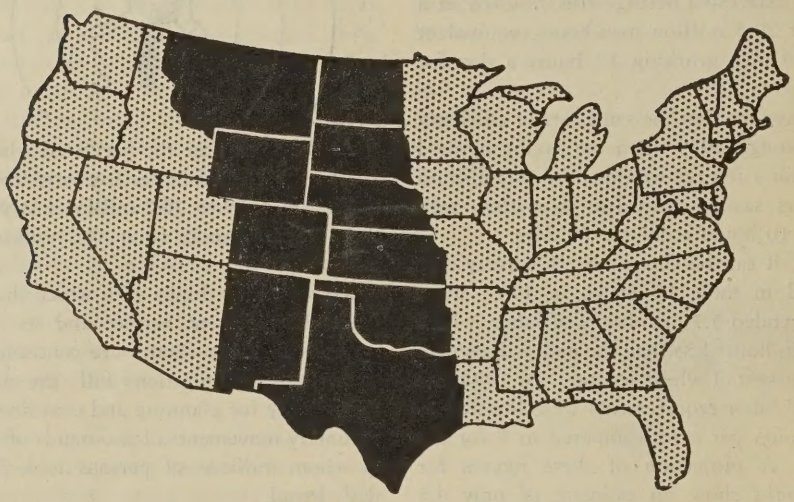

STATE EMPLOYMENT SERVICES PARTICIPATING IN THE COOPERATIVE WHEAT AGREEMENT

- COLORADO
- KANSAS
- MONTANA
- NEBRASKA
- NEW MEXICO
- NORTH DAKOTA
- OKLAHOMA
- SOUTH DAKOTA
- TEXAS
- WYOMING

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